DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 221 234 JC 820 381

AUTHOR Hodges, Daniel L.
TITLE Frustration: Or Why LCC's System of Testing and Placement Does Not Work Better.
INSTITUTION Lane Community Coll., Eugene, Oreg.
PUB DATE 81
NOTE 6p.
JOURNAL CIT Focus on Productivity; n4 p8-11 Sum 1981

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Community Colleges; Course Content; Course Evaluation; Educational Testing; Grades (Scholastic); *Program Effectiveness; Reading Instruction; Reading Skills; *Remedial Programs; *Student Placement; *Testing Programs; *Test Reliability; Two Year Colleges

ABSTRACT

The present system of testing and placement at Lane Community College (LCC) provides for voluntary assessment in reading, writing, and mathematics during orientation period, followed by recommendations for enrollment in appropriate courses. While only 15% to 20% of the new students at LCC participate in the testing/placement program, it must be remembered that many students are thoroughly tested through some other department or means and many are already aware of their abilities. Although the present voluntary system is not seen by LCC faculty and staff as solving the problem of achieving accurate placement and preparation for advanced courses, neither is mandatory testing and placement seen as a solution. Research indicates that while the vast majority of LCC students have low reading skills, the majority are succeeding in college-level work; students who took remedial reading courses did not necessarily achieve higher grades than those who did not; and various reading tests and readability scales use different standards making it difficult to match reading test scores with text readability levels. A workable testing program would have instructors testing for the specific prerequisite skills needed to succeed in a given class or program. These prerequisites could be identified by analyzing lectures, instructional materials, and assignments and would include both content and study skills. Though a difficult process to develop and implement, such a testing program would be an improvement over the existing system. (KL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED221234

FRUSTRATION:
OR WHY LCC'S SYSTEM OF TESTING AND PLACEMENT DOES NOT WORK BETTER

Daniel L. Hodges
Coordinator of Testing
Lane Community College

From the Summer 1981 issue of "Focus on Productivity,"
at Lane Community College, 4000 East 30th Avenue,
Eugene, Oregon 97405

JC 820 381

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

D. Hodges &

E. D. Schafer

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☑ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

Frustration:
Or Why LCC's System of Testing and Placement Does Not Work Better

By Daniel Hodges, Coordinator of Testing
Lane Community College, Eugene, OR.

Has this happened to you as it has happened to many teachers? On the first day of class you watched a classroom of students come in and sit down. Although you knew some were better prepared than others, you still intended to teach your course so that all the students had a chance at succeeding. You tried to teach well over the next few days and weeks. You lectured carefully, you made your demonstrations of skills clear, you announced the objectives clearly, you made the tests fair, you used material that was as readable as you could find, and tried to make it interesting. Oh! How you tried to make it interesting!

But then students said disturbing things to you. Several people— grownup men and women —complained that the books were too hard to read and understand. And sometimes they said they could not always follow your explanations, either. Since you wondered if the cause lay in the students' verbal intelligence or reading skills or in a bad book or even in your possible lack of teaching skill, you asked, "How well can you read?"

"Not very well, I've always been a poor reader."

"Well," you asked, "didn't a counselor tell you to improve your reading first before you enrolled in this course?"

"No. I couldn't see a counselor." (OR "I saw a counselor but she/he didn't say anything about my reading.")

"Didn't you take a test when you first entered LCC?"

"Gee, nobody told me about a reading test."

So you got mad.

It was clear that these students needed to read better and faster. Maybe they needed some prerequisite courses. Then they could handle your course. So you dreamed that somebody would accurately test the students' reading skills. You blissfully imagined all those students taking reading courses in the Study Skills Department (well-funded, of course), and after one term or two or three, they came back to your course and succeeded triumphantly.

And you got mad again at the College for not doing better at it.

Maybe for you the preceding scenario revolved around a different set of skills. Maybe your students needed more math or better writing skills or better study skills or some prerequisite skills unique to your area or more accurate expectations about the amount of work that the role of college student required. Maybe it was something else. But in any case, it looked to you as if good entrance testing and placement would solve a lot of problems.

I've been the Coordinator of Testing in the Counseling Department for two years now. Before that I was a sociology teacher for all of my working career. So naturally I've given the matter some thought. I've also been to several conferences on the topic, including a major one sponsored by the League for Innovation in the Community College. I've also searched through testing textbooks, many articles, and the ERIC abstracts in educational research. I've also reconsidered some of the standard sociological findings and social psychological research in the light of student problems. As a result, I think I can tell why there are sharp limits to the usual ideas about entrance testing. And I think I can tell you what might work better—if you want to try it.

First, I'd like to describe the way we have been handling entering students for a couple of years. When new students hand in an application blank at the Admissions Office, the people there give the prospective student an information sheet telling about the counselors' orientation sessions, the entrance testing, and the orientations for special programs. When the new students come to the Counseling Department counter to sign up for an orientation session, the counseling staff suggest that they take the reading, writing and math tests to check their basic skills. Later at the group orientation sessions the counselors suggest that students who have not tested yet come and take the tests. The students are promised an earlier registration time than they would otherwise get. This motivates many students.

We test the students in reading, writing, basic arithmetic, and (if appropriate) basic algebra. As soon as a student is done, we score the tests, enter the results on a couple of standard report sheets, and talk to the students about our recommendations. If reading skills are low, we recommend one or more Study Skills courses. If grammar and punctuation skills are low, we recommend either writing classes in Study Skills or Writing 120 in Language Arts. The seriousness of the student's deficiency determines our recommendation. If the students cannot pass arithmetic and/or algebra, we recommend the appropriate course.

We found last year that about 60 percent of the poorest readers followed our recommendations. Somewhat fewer of the better, but below-average, readers followed what we said. As far as writing goes, approximately 40 to 50 percent of the students followed our recommendations. It is harder to define agreement with our recommendations, however, because many students took Communications Skills or Business English. Some students with poor writing skills took those classes but avoided Writing 121. Finally, over a year's time about 30 percent of students did not take any writing classes at all. We haven't checked how often students took math classes in accordance with our suggestions. As I'll describe below, students who ignored our recommendations often succeeded anyway.

How many students does our voluntary testing program affect? Between 15 and 20 percent of students that have to go to new Student Registration take our tests. But you need to keep in mind that many students don't really need to be tested. Students who enter Health Occupations programs each fall took rigorous screening tests the previous spring. Many students are part-time, and many have prior college experience either here or elsewhere. Other students have recently graduated from high school and know their skills. Still others are deathly afraid of tests, and they enter college gradually and gently with a lot of support from counselors. Foreign students have taken rigorous exams on their proficiency in English and usually don't take our placement tests.

As students start courses in many departments, their teachers do additional screening. Math and Study Skills are examples.

As you can see, a lot of students don't really need to be tested. Still, we know full well that many more students should check their basic skills and get some advice on proper placement. It's helpful if all people who deal with prospective students suggest the tests to them. If most people here took it for granted that the testing was useful and talked positively about it to the students, it would influence more students. Even so, it's still not appropriate to test everybody.

Faults With the Present System

Why is the present system not solving our problems of getting accurate placement and accurate preparation for advanced courses? One point of view is that it is helping the students who do accept testing and placement. It may be the other students who have problems. If we required all students to be tested and required students to accept the placements which the tests indicated, perhaps the problem would be solved. If we were willing to test the students who I don't feel "need" to be tested, perhaps we would catch the students who do need to be tested.

We can evaluate this point of view by using available information here.

We have a lot of data on the students we have tested over the last couple of years. We know something about the courses they chose and grades they received. In addition, the testing textbooks and professional articles have described results at other colleges.

Let's start with the students' reading ability. It is obvious to any person with experience in education that students who cannot read English at all or who read, but read poorly, have almost no chance of success. This applies to vocational courses as well as college transfer courses.

But we have found we can't seem to link reading skills well enough to placements so that we can make a substantial difference in the students' achievement. We can measure reading ability somewhat. We improve the reading ability of some students a lot. We only make a minor difference for most students. And the improved reading ability by itself doesn't raise student success very much in other courses.

Let me share a few figures with you. We test students with the Reading Comprehension Test. It is part of the Comparative Guidance and Placement Program published by the College Board of Princeton, N.J. It is used by many four- and two-year colleges in America. It consists of eight passages written at the 13th grade reading level. There are 35 questions. One-half of our students miss more than seven questions. But it's worse nationally at other community colleges. One-half of the students nationwide miss about 12 questions.

Think about the meaning of these facts. The students

were tested on material similar to many textbooks. They were asked specific questions and permitted to look back at the passages to find the answers. If they did this poorly on a test, think of their added problems in doing your homework. Usually, they don't have study questions to guide their thinking, and they have much more to read at a time than three or four column inches. So they read many pages of material, they don't ask themselves specific questions about it, and you expect them to learn or memorize many parts of it. It's no wonder that college is difficult.

Given these facts about low reading skills, should we require the vast majority of our students to take reading courses? I don't think so. Here are some of the reasons. And I'm going to ignore the big practical problems of teaching reading to more than half of our students. Not to mention the undetermined question of how many months it would take before students' reading skills would improve enough to really make a difference in their chances of success in your class.

The first reason for not requiring reading for most students is that you instructors are giving decent grades to the overwhelming majority of the students. For example, 81 percent of the students with slightly below average reading scores (23 to 27 points) got 2.00 averages or higher in Fall 1979. And almost half of them (49 percent) got 3.00 grade-point averages. Even the lowest scoring students (1-16 questions right) did reasonably well. Sixty-six percent of them got C averages or better. And more of them would have succeeded, except that almost 20 percent of them dropped everything before finishing. If they had persisted and worked, their success would have been modest, but real.

You may wonder about the very best students—the ones who get 32 to 35 questions right. Only 88 percent of them get C averages or better. Five percent of them dropped everything, and some of the rest got some D's and F's. It's possible for good readers to do poorly and for poor readers to do well. (I have a lot more information. If you're interested, come by the Testing Office and ask to see it.)

This information seems to indicate that somehow most students are succeeding well enough not to need special reading courses.

In addition, there's a second reason. I got curious as to whether the students who took remedial courses related to reading skills would get better grades than students who ignored reading-related remedial courses. Although the figures are too complex to summarize easily, the basic answers are these: It helps the very poorest students the most to take the reading courses. With a reading course 61 percent of them got a 2.5 average. Without one, 40 percent got a 2.5. But almost equal proportions got 2.0 averages whether or not they took reading. For the below-average readers, other than the poorest readers, it doesn't help much in the chance of getting a C average, but a reading course helps about 10 percent more to get a B average. Obviously not everyone's grades profit from reading courses. And many poor readers who skip remedial courses still succeed well.

If I were a doctor and the students were my patients, I'd be hesitant to prescribe a "reading course" treatment for everyone. It would help some and not others, and some would do fine without it and others wouldn't. However, taking all things together, I'd probably recommend that poor readers take reading courses. But if I knew some personal facts about them (their level of drive and self-confidence, their study skills, etc.), I'd recommend different things to different students.

The Gap Between Test Scores and College Grades

Our finding that test results don't correlate highly with college grades is very common in testing research. The mighty College Boards only correlate about 0.50 with college grades. And our C.G.P. Reading Comprehension Test correlates between 0.30 and 0.35 with college grades. (The precise level varies with the group of students we look at.) Lest you blame the test and say, "Get a better test," I should add it's probably not the fault of the test.

Since many variables influence college success, it's unreasonable to expect a reading test's results alone to greatly help us to place students and to greatly improve their grades. Hubert Blalock, the President of the American Sociological Association last year, made a comment in his presidential speech that fits here. He said that in order for social scientists to make a satisfactory explanation of any social phenomenon, they need a theory containing *upward of 50 variables!* If he's right, then in order to explain our students' success in learning you'd need to gather data on more than 50 characteristics of the students, of their friends and lives, of your teaching methods, and of other factors. Obviously, one reading test isn't enough. Yes, reading is important. But it's wrong to expect too much improvement from one or two tests and a few placements in basic skills courses.

Let me mention the "reading level" fallacy here. Some people believe that you should measure the reading levels of textbooks, measure the reading levels of students and then match up the two of them. But after I got into testing research, I discovered that the people who made up the reading level scales for textbooks were not using the same standards that the writers of reading tests were using. In fact, even reading test writers disagree. One college level researcher in New York tried our three popular college reading tests on his students. The tests often placed the students two or three grade levels different from one another. "If the thermometers aren't calibrated, how can you tell if you're cold?" (Think about it . . . .)

Moreover, the so- called "reading level" scales only measure very shallow traits of books: their sentence length, length of words, familiarity of words, and the like. But the deeper things that make for intelligible

writing often go unmeasured. Many a writer can be superficially high-level, but tell the story entertainingly, build the argument in clear steps, apply theories and principles to examples effectively and be very helpful to read. So it's not reasonable to expect us to be able to predict from a test which students need remedial help in reading a particular book. Even poor readers could learn from well-written books, but good readers might be baffled by poorly-written books.

Besides the difficulty of matching reading tests to text books, it's hard to match reading tests to a teacher's lectures or tests. Teachers vary widely among themselves in how clearly they lecture. They vary in the depth and complexity of the knowledge they demand from their students on tests.

Since we use one reading test and one standard of recommendations for students who may take more than 1,500 courses from several hundred teachers using several thousand books, manuals, syllabi, etc., we've got an impossible job of telling from our test whether students can succeed.

There is another difficulty with the idea of testing students and placing them in classes for improving reading. It takes a reasonably long time to help average readers make a major improvement in their reading skills. And, as I indicated before, there may not be a great enough payoff in improved grades for average readers to judge the long investment of time to be worthwhile. But below-average readers with poor reading skills do find it worthwhile. Even so, the statistics we have gathered do not show the sharp increases in grades that we hope for.

What does work? Remember Blalock's statement that "upwards of 50 variables" are needed to explain a social phenomenon. That means that no one factor is crucial.

A Workable Testing Program

However, if one desires to test students and help them learn prerequisites they are missing, there is a strategy that tends to work. *You test for the specific prerequisite skills that a student needs to succeed in your particular class or program.* You avoid general tests. The testing that we do for the Math Department is a good example. It covers very specific skills that are definitely needed for success in later classes. Another example is our testing for skills in recognizing correct and incorrect English usage. We thought it was a prerequisite for success in Writing 121. (Our research seems to indicate that it isn't—but that's another story.)

How does one find the specific prerequisites? You analyze a lecture or a chapter in a textbook, and you look for the skills and knowledge needed to handle the new material that are not taught in this lesson. Those skills are prerequisites. You also analyze your tests and your assignments. "What do I demand," you ask yourself. If you demand that the students learn specific facts from the textbook and not learn the research methods, you have in effect made the *ability to find specific facts* a prerequisite skill. Many students lack the ability to discriminate among facts, theories, concepts, definitions, examples, etc. You may have to teach this. If you demand that the students memorize certain things, you are presupposing that they know how to memorize something. Surprisingly, many students lack knowledge of effective memory techniques. You may have to teach it. Do you require the students to practice a skill until it's perfected? Many students do not know how to practice. They've never heard of visualizing the standard and comparing their results to it or slow practice or practicing small units or mental practice.

I haven't even mentioned any specific knowledge and skills that are unique to your course.

Who can do this kind of testing? The LCC Testing Office could not do it. The job requires too much diversity of testing. It looks as if the instructors in each course and in each program need to design their own tests. They need to analyze the knowledge and skills that students need for success in their courses, make sure that there is truly a sequence of courses so that placement is possible, and then create some tests, do the testing, place the students and help teach the deficient skills and knowledge. You will have decide whether to persuade the students to remedy their deficiencies or to require them to do it.

It's not easy to do. Just ask people in our Math Department. Even though math has a very logical sequence of skill, the instructors have placement problems. Consider Math 101—College Algebra. A number of programs require it. Many students persist in trying to take it despite not having the skills to pass Introductory Algebra or Intermediate Algebra. Even after the instructors try to explain the likely bad consequences, many students won't listen. Most such students do have problems and decide to drop.

The implications are unpleasant. If instructors in a clearly structured field like Math have problems about getting students to face the reality of learning basic skills before advanced skills, imagine the problems that instructors in other areas will have! Undoubtedly even worse!

Yet I am still confident that it is a good practice to test for specific prerequisite skills, to provide help for students deficient in those skills, and to place them accordingly. Benjamin Bloom suggested it in the February, 1980, *Phi Delta Kappan*. This method is consistent with what the best teaching practices suggest, it is used in mastery learning problems, and it is being explored by at least one League for Innovation college, Cuyahoga Community College in Cleveland. And it is certainly better than our current practices. The only thing wrong with it is that it takes work to develop.

But if we do test and place for specific prerequisite skills, we'll end up less frustrated. That would be nice.

6

ERIC Clearinghouse for Junior Colleges
96 Powell Library Building
University of California
Los Angeles, California 90024

OCT 29 1982